

Save a Child: How to Identify and Report Child Abuse¹

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Child abuse is a concern for everyone. Child abusers may be from any socioeconomic class, race, educational background, or religion (CWLA, 2024). People who work with children, parents, and the public may at some point in their lives and careers report child abuse. It is important to be able to recognize the symptoms of abuse and to contact the appropriate authorities. By reporting abuse, you may save a child's life or prevent serious injury.

In 2022, 24,510 cases of abuse were verified in Florida, down 33.4% since 2018. A troubling statistic indicates that an estimated 2,000 children died nationally because of child abuse in 2023, a number that has remained stable over the past several years. There were 86 deaths in Florida in 2022, which is a marked reduction from the 114 deaths in 2019 (CWLA, 2024; USDHHS, 2019).

This publication discusses child abuse laws and procedures for reporting abuse. It also contains information about different types of abuse and ways to identify abused or neglected children. Characteristics listed in this publication are general and intended as guidelines. A child or family may exhibit many warning signs of abuse, although no abuse has occurred or ever will occur.

Prior to April 2012, Florida law required only childcare providers, physicians, teachers, law enforcement officers, and any other person having reason to believe a child under the age of 18 was being abused to report abuse. Failure to report suspected abuse was regarded as a misdemeanor.

Florida now requires any person who suspects child abuse, neglect, or abandonment to report (FL Code §§ 39.201) (The Florida Legislature, 2024).

Former Governor Scott signed into law one of the nation's strictest abuse reporting bills (Business Wire, 2012). Florida House Bill 1355 on the "Protection of Vulnerable Persons," signed in April 2012, proposes a fine of up to \$1 million on any college or university, public or private, whose administration or law enforcement willfully and knowingly fails to report child abuse occurring on campus, in facilities, or at university-sponsored events and functions. The Act requires the Florida Child Abuse Hotline to take allegations of child abuse reports even if the suspected abuser is *not* a caregiver or parent, and it has provisions for relocation of child victims of sexual assault when there is reasonable concern for their safety.

There are different ways to report abuse in Florida. You may call the Department of Children and Families (DCF) **Central Abuse Hotline at 1-800-96ABUSE (1-800-962-2873). The TDD number is 1-800-453-5145.** DCF has developed an online process of reporting that is very useful in filing your report. It is located online at <https://reportabuse.myflfamilies.com/s/>. More information about child protection in Florida is available from the DCF website at <https://www.myflfamilies.com>. It is not the responsibility of the person reporting the suspected abuse to determine if abuse has occurred. An investigator will be assigned to determine this. Florida has an immunity law as well.

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This law protects you from lawsuits that could arise from reporting the abuse so long as the incident is reported in “good faith.” **Remember: Report child abuse to protect the child, not to punish the suspected abuser.**

Indicators of Physical Abuse

Physical child abuse is the intentional harming of a child by an adult. This harm may include excessive shaking, bruising, beating (e.g., with fists, belt, board, wire hanger, etc.), or burning (e.g., scalding water, cigarette burns). There were 2,671 cases of physical child abuse in Florida in 2022 (CWLA, 2024).

Physically abused children can be identified by various means (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019).

Physical Signs of Physical Abuse

- Unexplained injuries, such as cuts, bruises, bites, burns, broken bones, or black eyes
- Fading bruises or other visible marks after absence from school
- Changes in eating and sleeping habits

Behavioral Signs of Physical Abuse

- Seems frightened, anxious, aggressive, and/or withdrawn
- Acts afraid of parents, or protests/cries when it is time to return home
- Child shrinks when adults approach
- Reports being injured by parent or caregiver
- Abuses animals or pets

Indicators of Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse is sexual contact with a child by another person who may use force or threats, or exploit a position of authority. Sexual abuse is known as an adverse childhood experience (ACE) that is linked to poor health outcomes. In fact, sexual abuse in childhood as an ACE is linked with the worst mental and physical health problems in adolescence and adulthood (as compared with ACEs such as divorce or growing up in poverty), with physical abuse as a close second (Putnam et al., 2020). The sexual abuser is most often a parent, guardian, relative, family friend, or someone the child knows. Acts of sexual abuse perpetrated by strangers are usually single episodes with many different children, while familial sexual abuse is usually multiple occurrences to the same child over a period of months or years. Child-on-child sexual abuse also needs to be reported the same way as other forms of abuse. Make sure to note the age of the child perpetrator, as a case involving a child 12 years old

or younger will be handled differently than a case involving a child aged 13 or older. There were 2,891 cases of child sexual abuse reported in Florida in 2022, making up 11.8% of all confirmed cases (CWLA, 2024).

The common characteristics of a sexually abused child are discussed below (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019).

Physical Signs of Sexual Abuse

- Trauma to the mouth, anus, or vagina (may include difficulty walking or sitting)
- Bleeding, bruising, or swelling in their private parts
- Painful urination
- Inability to control bowels

Behavioral Signs of Sexual Abuse

- Sexual knowledge unusual for age (may be revealed in speech, behavior, drawings, or stories told)
- Inappropriate focus on genitals of self or others
- Reversion to more childlike behaviors (such as crying for no apparent reason)
- Becomes pregnant or contracts an STI or STD, especially if under the age of 14
- Sleep problems and/or nightmares (found with people with post-traumatic stress)
- Runs away from home
- Reports sexual abuse by parent or caregiver
- Attaches unusually quickly to strangers or new adults in their environment

Indicators of Child Neglect

Child neglect is a condition in which a child’s basic needs for food, shelter, clothing, prompt medical attention, and emotional support are not met. Unlike physical and sexual abuse, child neglect is a result of what parents or guardians **fail to do for** their children, not what they *do to* their children. This is the most common form of child abuse, with 71% or 17,496 confirmed cases in 2022 in Florida (CWLA, 2024).

Like physical and sexual abusers, persons who neglect their children may be from any socioeconomic class, race, sex, religion, or educational background. Common indicators of child neglect include the following (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019):

Physical Signs of Child Neglect

- Frequent school absence
- Child is inappropriately dressed, lacks sufficient clothing for weather
- Extreme hunger indicated by child, who may beg for or steal food or money
- Unkempt appearance of a child; apparent lack of hygiene with body odor
- Lacks needed medical care (immunizations, dental care, glasses)

Behavioral Signs of Child Neglect

- Extreme behavior of a child (disruptive or withdrawn)
- States there is no one at home to provide care
- Abuses alcohol or other drugs

Reporting Child Abuse or Neglect

Once you suspect abuse or neglect, you need to contact the proper authorities. Florida has the Florida Department of Children and Families. This organization is staffed by trained individuals who will take your call and act upon the information you give them. Before you call, be sure you have the information listed below (Florida DCF, 2025). If you are a professionally mandated reporter (e.g., teacher, police officer), additional instructions are available at <https://www.myflfamilies.com/services/abuse/abuse-hotline/how-report-abuse/what-you-need>.

- The child's name, and the possible responsible person's or alleged perpetrator's name
- Complete address for child and possible perpetrator, including numbered street address and apartment number
- Names of nearby residents and relationship to victim(s), if available
- Relationship of alleged perpetrator to the victim
- When you noticed the abuse
- Any marks on the child and location of marks, or any other observable symptoms
- Any other important information

Reporters can use the fax transmittal form at <https://www.myflfamilies.com/sites/default/files/2022-12/faxreport.pdf> to write down the information needed by DCF investigators. Do not be concerned if you do not know all the information on the form. List what you do know.

After a report is taken, either *immediate* or *24-hour* priority is given to it. All investigations are to commence within 24 hours of receiving the report. An investigator will interview the child and other sources to determine if abuse has occurred. (Finding marks on a child does not mean the child was abused.)

If abuse or neglect has occurred, the child protection investigator will attempt to find out who is abusing or neglecting the child and/or will refer the case to law enforcement. If it is a parent or guardian, the child protection investigator will establish the level of risk to the child. DCF attempts to keep the family together, but the safety of the child comes first.

Summary

Any child could experience abuse and neglect at any time by anyone. Contact your local Department of Children and Families office for more information, training, and special local programs that protect children and strengthen families. By recognizing some common symptoms of abuse and neglect, you can bring about early intervention to alleviate a child's suffering and provide treatment for an abusive person.

Child protection teams have a goal of investigating suspected cases of child abuse and neglect and making appropriate referrals to service providers. For example, a multidisciplinary Child Protection Team (within the Children's Medical Services Center) at the University of Florida involves attorneys, pediatricians, psychologists, medical assistants, mental health counselors, social workers, and information systems specialists. See <https://cpt.pediatrics.med.ufl.edu/about-us/> for more information. This team serves the following cities in north central Florida: Brooksville, Chiefland, Gainesville, Lake City, Lecanto, Starke, and Trenton. For more information on child protection teams statewide, see <https://www.floridahealth.gov/programs-and-services/childrens-health/cms-specialty-programs/Child-Protection/index.html>.

Selected State and National Child Abuse Prevention Organizations

The Florida Central Abuse Hotline

(Voice): 1-800-962-2873

(TDD): 1-800-453-5145

(Fax): 1-800-914-0004

Website for reporting and information: <https://reportabuse.myflfamilies.com/s/>

The National Exchange Club

3050 Central Avenue
Toledo, OH 43606-1700
Phone: 419-535-3232
Toll-free: 800-XCHANGE (924-2643)
E-mail: nechq@aol.com
<https://www.nationalexchangeclub.org>

Prevent Child Abuse America

200 S Michigan Avenue
17th Floor
Chicago, IL 60604-2404
Phone: 312-663-3520
Fax: 312-939-8962
E-mail: mailbox@preventchildabuse.org
<https://preventchildabuse.org>

Parents Anonymous® Inc.

675 West Foothill Boulevard, Suite 220
Claremont, CA 91711-3475
Phone: 909-621-6184
E-mail (for general information): Parentsanonymous@parentsanonymous.org
<http://www.parentsanonymous.org/>

Childhelp USA National Headquarters

15757 N 78th Street
Scottsdale, AZ 85260
Phone: 800-422-4453
<https://www.childhelp.org>

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